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TRAINING THE SENSES

GIACOMO SANTIAGO ROGADO REVISITS ENCHANTMENT

by Ursula Pia Jauch

A Little Pedantic Retrospection

An ancient – it was Heraclitus of Ephesus – once made the following statement: “For in painting, it is by the mixing of colours, as white and black or yellow and red, that representations are made corresponding with the natural types.”

We latter-day thinkers were not present when this remark was recorded over 2500 years ago or possibly only cast in oral history. Whatever the case, since late antiquity the statement has been stored in the body of Heraclitus’ ‘Fragments’, a source that even specialists consider ‘dark’ and whose provenance is a mystery to this day. That, however, has not prevented it from wreaking centuries of philosophical havoc on the subject of painting. Is painting merely mimesis? Or is it in fact purposeful deceit? Does it possess a creative power all its own? Is it merely a more or less proficient act of copying the original? Or is painting itself original in the literal sense of the Latin word ‘origo’ = origin?

One needn’t be an expert on the history of antiquity to realise that artists – and above all painters – were always under suspicion. In fact, explicitly so. Just listen to Plato, the godfather – no, the überfather – of Greek philosophy. In his dialogue ‘Ion’, Socrates discusses the distinction between a good and a bad painter exclusively in terms of good or bad mimesis. In the dialogue ‘Cratylus’, music and painting are almost unquestioningly filed away as mimetic arts. And finally, in Plato’s ‘Republic’, painting is unabashedly negative, for it merely serves purposes of ‘appearance’, it is but a ‘shadow of the truth’ and is not a ‘respectable’ art.

On the Fear of Deception

Lest we forget: these dialogues go back to the fourth century before Christ. In the tenth chapter of The Republic, Plato pronounces painting to be a deceptive art removed from truth and reason. He is even more extreme in the Sophist, there equating painting with ‘merchandise of the soul’, which is cheerfully hawked in the market. Actually, as far as he’s concerned, the art trade is not a jot different from trading in ‘meats and drinks’ – a remark whose sobering message might seamlessly be extended to include the obsessively mercantile 21st century with its money-grubbing art fairs in Basel, Miami and elsewhere.

In short: managing the transition from the Platonic verdict of painterly prostitution to painting that is once again capable of containing humankind’s modicum of spirituality, and expressing it in a manner both poetological and existential, appears to be a tricky undertaking. Platonic ideology has pathologized but what one might call real reality. Everything that ‘is’ (and that includes all representation) can deceive us. Even in Descartes’ universe this deus malignus, this evil divine deceiver, prevails as a constituent of the distressed psyche and its fear of deception, in which a late Platonic

echo still lingers. Nonetheless, not all spiritual artistes and inner-life specialists have succumbed to that Platonic anxiety. Indeed, late antiquity's fanatic addiction to the pursuit of the supposedly one and only 'truth' may well have been responsible for considering suspect anything that smacks of illusion - and ultimately evil incarnate.

Blissfully, the annals of human history also rehearse the ability to engage in friendly and productive play with illusion and to enjoy magical, captivating access to the emotional depths afforded by painting (and music as well). Take one Agrippa von Nettesheim, a wise citizen of the early 16th century with a kind disposition toward astrology and the 'soft' modalities of knowledge. He was one of the first to make eloquent mention of the fact that painting is a mute art of poetic invention while the art of poetic invention is silver-tongued painting. Oddly enough, only the ancients cultivated such a sceptical attitude toward the art of representation. The farther we venture along the numerical ray of human history, the more hope is projected onto the arts as a medium potentially capable of upholding the intactness of the human soul and preserving it through inhospitable and cold times.

It seems that the dawning modern age whisked away the scepticism of the ancients towards painting. Ever since the early 15th century in particular, it has been the 'raison d'être' of art to accomplish what Ernst Gombrich calls the "conquest of reality". The Italian Renaissance, 17th century Holland, Romanticism (obviously), classical modernism and the present day: they all share the same sentiment. Art's march of triumph culminated ages ago in the belief that it possesses the singular potential to penetrate 'being'. Suddenly it became possible to endow painting with a metaphysics of inwardness, which the beholder can apprehend, so to speak, without words. One might say, with a certain pathos, that it is above all the medium of painting, with all its spiritual depth of field, that reveals - in Heideggerian terms - the fateful "thrownness" [Geworfenheit] of man. The romantic 'shock' of inwardness - Caspar David Friedrich is not the only one who comes to mind - may also have fostered the fact that art and artists themselves have become a metaphysically knighted authority. The painter possesses a key to inwardness; the artist is a kind of metaphysical agent. By the end of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche would see the artist as the only remaining figure capable of redeeming humankind.

An Early 21st Century Message in a Bottle

Such a protracted detour may seem odd when the business at hand is 'merely' to ruminate about a young Swiss artist of the cold, epigonal and somehow still disoriented 21st century. One can certainly appreciate the work of Giacomo Santiago Rogado without any philosophical and art historical excursus on the state of the picture. However, it's possible that investigation into what we can feel and how much of that we can represent is repeated every time anyone devotes serious thought to anything - and that includes the curious phenomenon known as art. On studying Giacomo Santiago Rogado's work, we soon realise that we do not only focus 'on' these pictures, for we can also speak about what lies 'behind' them.

Giacomo Santiago Rogado's most recent pictures, in particular, impart an oddly transcendental magic. They seem to oscillate between a mood, an aura and a spiritual squint. The longer we look, the more we may even descry something behind the scenes quietly tiptoeing to centre stage. This is quintessentially - one is tempted to say programmatically - illustrated by a picture of 2007. The title (which may be mere convention, but possibly also a hermeneutic hint for the beholder) offers

us one single term that seems to issue from a diffuse neo-romantic vocabulary: Mittsommernacht (Midsummer Night) ◇.

The picture is big, almost oversized. It measures 2 m 40 x 2 m 30. Both picture and beholder need considerable room to find one another. To begin with, there is a stringent, almost purist structure of undulating lines that clearly obeys geometrical and optical laws, with changeable colours defined by a private colour cabal. Anyone familiar with Greek antiquity might presume that the lines show an ether (which was, of course, the air the gods used to breathe on Mount Olympus). In any case, the structure of undulating lines, the Midsummer night sky, is anything but inanimate. There is such a humming and flickering in the air that it is virtually impossible to steer clear of the optical effect, despite the square in the middle that allows a glimpse of shimmering sky and a second view of neo-romantic (or neo-surreal?) cloudy grey skies. The effect of Horizont (Horizon) ◇ is similar. The linear structure seems to open up like a curtain providing a view through a peephole into another world, another horizon.

A sky behind the sky? A world beyond the world? A night behind Midsummer Night? Given the terminology that weighs down the language of philosophy, one might speak in this context of a 'transcendental dualism' – transcendental inasmuch as we, the beholders of Rogado's Mittsommernacht (Midsummer Night) ◇, see a second picture behind the first, one that surmounts (which is literally what the Latin transcendere tells us) the first viewing level.

Transcendental Dualism

And the dualism? That too does more than just make an appearance in the work of Giacomo Santiago Rogado; it is conspicuous. There is, for one thing, the conceptual rigour that resides in the formal aesthetic: lines, waves, drips and a meticulously calculated palette, generating oscillating visual impressions that converge only in the eye of the beholder. Borrowing a word from the aesthetics of music, one might speak of serial painting. In Dämmerung (Twilight) ◇, Pointe (Point) ◇ and Puls (Pulse) ◇, the effect is even more conspicuous and mono-substantive, as it were – 'optical' pictures one and all (although I would prefer not to belabour the Op Art label since the fine arts are by definition optical, from which it follows that the Op Art cubbyhole is little more than a tautology).

The gaunt formal rigour of these works – executed in other works as well, with almost scientific exactitude – is of a curiously meditative impact. And yet, for another, there is a reverse movement that threatens to break into the undercooled ritual rigour (or more precisely, to open up behind it). In Mittsommernacht (Midsummer Night) ◇, it is a centred square that reveals an almost haptic, 'transcendental' cloudscape, whose tones of grey, though set within the colourful linearity of the foregrounded surround, do not detract from the impression of a late romantic message in a bottle. We look out, out of the serial space, at a fanciful cloudscape stretching into the distance, hinting at the possibility that there are still spiritual messages to be discovered behind all the calculating austerity of the present day and that retrospection – looking back, for example, at a skyscape by Jacob van Ruisdael – is still possible. Suddenly the supposedly divorced elements – austerity and clarity versus dream and soft spirituality – are not so rigidly separate after all but instead coexist in a state of amicable dualism.

This amicable bond between the formal, aesthetic principle and a co-existent landscape of the soul that opens onto a somehow 'romantic' prehistory appears to be an unspoken concern for Giacomo

Santiago Rogado. His 'dualism' is not of the Cartesian rigour that precluded communication between body and mind, as championed by René Descartes in the first third of the 17th century. While logic, formal reason and science tried to define being primarily through separation and delineation (Isn't that what 'definition' means?), we find ourselves now succumbing to the enchantment of Giacomo Santiago Rogado's imagination and his ability to unite two supposedly divorced states of being. The notion of enchantment, of being enchanted, is basically suspect to begin with, given the cool, ornament-free Bauhaus character of today's universe. And then along comes an artist who does not adhere to the unwritten principles or petrified neuroticisms of contemporary art of the ilk that has unconditionally banned from its chronicles all that is figurative, soft, dreamy and enchanted.

Spectres of Introspection

A look at Rogado's most recent work yields the impression that one can trace a line of development from primarily formal concerns to the spiritual, enigmatic inner landscapes of some past age – an impression that becomes inescapable on looking at the large double portraits of two essentially different figures – a man and a woman – depicted in the same indistinguishably introverted pose. The portraits – I am speaking about Poet & Poesie (Poet & Poetry) ♦, Bellevue ♦ and Weiß & Prosa (White & Prose) ♦ – have a statuesque feel, underscored by their exemplary dimensions of 190 x 180 cm. They are like spectres of introspection. They could in fact be a profound shock to the inner life of unprepared, laid-back contemporary viewers, possibly even provoking a kind of toxic reaction. To us nomadic Argonauts of the early 20th century, the attitude and character of the sitters give them the appearance of citizens from a long bygone age, late memorials to an age that still appreciated heritage and soul, respectability and ironed blouses. The physiognomies are not today's. Theirs is not the direct gaze, steeled against the present. Instead, tidy hairdos, proper clothing and generally severe exteriors shelter a sensibility that we have been unable to afford for ages. These faces represent a human type that seems to us like a species rara of spiritualization. The portraits toy with a tiny touch of uptight sensuality even though Eros dominates the space of the picture.

Sleeveless Sweaters of Being, Illuminated by Clouds

One may still have encountered such faces and attitudes as late as the 1920s and 1930s. But now these abstracted figures strike us as mementos of what we have lost. Common to all three pairs – whereby 'pair' may also be read as proxy for the principle of undivorced dualism – is the vests they are wearing, vests for the soul. These little sleeveless sweaters of being, illuminated by clouds, themselves refer to a horizon beyond the body. Strictly and conservatively speaking, they are emblems of a painted meta-physics. As a matter of fact, vests are extremely wilful, iridescent and positively ticklish items of clothing, whose significance visibly seesaws between soul warmers and chain mail worn inside out. The little blue soul sweater worn by the young lady called Poesie (Poetry) ♦ not only wards off things coming from without but, more importantly, allows us a glimpse inside. One might even call it inner-life armour, a friendly shield against the loss of introspection and for the preservation of the ability to daydream and let thoughts wander until they get lost in the clouds, in the distance and beyond the horizon.

The gaze of the subjects shows a distinct affinity with their apparel and focuses throughout on a vanishing point beyond the day's reality. We are dealing here with an illusionismo, with visual deception, a trompe l'oeil, but not in art historical terms. It is a perfectly pragmatic move towards

being permitted once again to devote ourselves to play, to mental gyrations and friendly self-deception. After all, we learned long ago from the theory of knowledge that we cannot recognize the thing ‘in and of itself’. Cognition – feeling and thinking – is always subjective. Our perception of the world and its facts is necessarily filtered through our senses.

No doubt, art historical cognoscenti will alight on associations with Surrealism and *pittura metafisica*. But inasmuch as a work of art is also a work of thought – clearly the case in Giacomo Santiago Rogado’s art – there is no such thing as *pittura* or painting that is not, at the same time, *metafisica* and surreal. Naturally, some things fit. We have the feeling we’ve discovered a window to Magritte. A look at the woman reading in Rogado’s *Weiß & Prosa* (White & Prose) ♦ might conjure memories of Magritte’s *Lectrice soumise* of 1928. But they are distant. Rogado’s reader is eighty years younger and of a quiet, somehow more civilised, more bridled attentiveness, while in Magritte’s painting, the shock seems literally to spring out of the pages and into the face of the reader. Echoes of Magritte may also be found in the cloudy blue vests in *Poet & Poesie* (Poet & Poetry) ♦ – think of the Belgian’s early *Rencontres naturelles* (1945) or the sky in his *Empire des lumières* (1954). And anyone taking the criminalist approach of art criticism grown chilly and bloodless may also recall other visions of the expansive horizon line that marks Rogado’s sleeveless sweaters in *Bellevue* ♦ or his *Horizont* (Horizon) ♦ – not just in Magritte’s work, but among the Dutch painters and maybe even Caspar David Friedrich.

First Second Patience

A neo-romantic? An illusionist? Rehearsal shuttling between Op Art and Surrealism? Is it all quotation? Epigonal? Is there anything we latter-day citizens can do beyond behaving as authentically as possible, as if we were the first ever to feel and express all that has already been devised and felt and thought? We are strange hybrid beings. We engage in retrospection. Our gaze bears the weight of history that keeps getting longer and heavier. So we look ahead in the hopes of catching a glimpse of something genuine, earthshaking, an impenetrable [unhintergebar] sense of being. What a fortunate mortal to be blessed with the ability to impart such feelings once again; what a fortunate mortal to be able to offer visual sanctuary to the Eros of thought – though possibly undiscovered at first sight. Training the senses calls for patience. More than one second. And possibly more than once. Exactly. First. Second. Patience.

Notes

1/ Heraclitus of Ephesus, The G.W.T. Patrick Translation, <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/heraclitus01.htm> (accessed 15 January 2009).

2/ As are, incidentally, most of the philosophical sources handed down from the ancients. Tellingly, even Plato's Dialogues, which supply the underpinnings for much of Western thought, were not printed until the 15th century, not until they were latinized by the Renaissance humanist Marsilio Ficino.

3/ Along with the musical arts, which are just as suspect.

4/ For Nietzsche, whom I happily second, 'truth' exists only in the plural.

5/ Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium*, 'De pictura', chapter 24.

6/ Indeed, the psychological and psychoanalytical consequences of writings like Adolf Loos' *Ornament and Crime* (1908) and specifically the purism of the German Bauhaus movement have yet to be redressed; apply any suitably existential spiritual warmth to form, and it still suffers the onus of pure 'decoration' and (even worse) of 'cosiness'.

7/ Cf. for instance, Helmuth Lethen: *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte*, Frankfurt, 1994.

8/ Aristotle uses the word 'metaphysics' – to mean the chapters of his writings that lie "behind the chapter on physics". *Physis* started out quite simply as a physical body.

Author

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